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SUBJECT: FOLLOW UP TO THE CAIRO SPEECH: NEXT STEPS FOR
CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

SUMMARY

¶1. Yemen's daunting internal challenges present many opportunities for more robust US engagement in the areas that President Barack Obama outlined in his June 4 speech in Cairo. Consultations with Yemeni interlocutors point to continuing opportunities to support Yemen's government and civil society in improving educational opportunities, developing democratic institutions, and securing the rights of women. Meanwhile, the Palestinian question and the status of Guantanamo detainees significantly shape Yemeni popular perceptions of the US and are critical to achieving a "new beginning" in Yemeni-US relations. END SUMMARY.

CONSULTATIVE STRATEGY

¶2. The areas of potential cooperation between the US and the Muslim world that President Barack Obama outlined in his June 4 speech in Cairo resonated with Yemeni interlocutors. Post organized a variety of consultations on the speech with key interlocutors, ranging from formal events hosted at the Ambassador's residence to informal conversations with business contacts in Aden. Consultations with youth were particularly important, and 'watch parties' were organized with students studying English at several institutions in Sana'a, followed by discussions of the President's remarks. Through these consultations, post discerned opportunities to follow up on the speech's key themes.

EDUCATION: THE WELL THAT NEVER RUNS DRY

¶3. As oil reserves dwindle and the population swells, Yemen is seeking to develop a skilled labor force to diversify the economy and integrate with lucrative neighboring markets. President Obama's pledge to increase citizen exchanges and educational and scientific cooperation attracted attention from educational administrators and policy makers as they seek to further develop the country's human capital.

¶4. One of the best ways that post can provide educational support in Yemen is through English-language instruction, which continues to be in high demand. The post-managed Yemen America Language Institute (YALI) is a flagship institution for English instruction in Sana'a, where many up-and-coming ROYG and private sector leaders study. Through partner organization Amideast, post is currently expanding our English Access Microscholarships program into rural areas of Yemen that are recruiting grounds for extremist organizations, including the governorates of Abyan, Lahj, and Hadramaut. The Access program is a highly cost-effective way to expose underprivileged Yemeni youth to intercultural dialogue and to give them a sought-after and marketable skill: English-language proficiency. USAID is also managing basic education projects designed to increase the quality of educational services and boost enrollment at the primary

level.

¶15. Interlocutors frequently request the development of direct partnerships between US and Yemeni universities, to increase the number of students traveling between the two countries, increase capacity-building programs for Yemeni university administrators and faculty, and to collaborate on research projects in areas of local need. Interlocutors also request increases in the numbers of Fulbright fellows and other exchange participants sent from Yemen to the US. Currently, only four to six Yemeni Fulbrighters travel to the US each year for masters degree programs. American Fulbright students and scholars were evacuated from Yemen in the spring of 2008 and security policies have not yet permitted their return.

¶16. In addition to educational exchanges, scientific and technical cooperation will be essential in helping Yemen to overcome chronic scarcities of water and electricity. In the immediate future, Yemen will need to develop new sources of fresh water, conserve existing non-renewable water sources, and increase local electricity generation capacity to address worsening nationwide blackouts. Cooperation in fields like biotechnology and renewable energy will be helpful on these fronts.

A DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS

¶17. President Obama's emphasis on the importance of representative government comes at a difficult time for Yemeni democracy. Parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2009 were postponed for two years because the ruling

party and opposition could not agree on fundamental issues affecting the conduct of the elections. President Ali Abdullah Saleh has governed for 31 years, and few interlocutors can identify a potential successor who could manage the country's numerous political fissures and crises.

¶18. Through MEPI and Public Diplomacy grants, post is supporting projects to increase civic participation among youth, facilitate workshops on electoral reform for parliamentarians and political party activists, and facilitate legislative advocacy by key stakeholder groups like the national journalists' syndicate, among other initiatives. Post has a strong partnership with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), working together on election monitoring and anti-corruption projects. USAID is currently supporting projects to decentralize public service delivery, strengthen electoral institutions, and train parliamentarians on anti-corruption strategies. In the past, both MEPI and USAID have partnered with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) on democracy and governance projects as well. Looking ahead, interlocutors stress that a return to regularly scheduled parliamentary elections in 2011 is essential to rehabilitating Yemen's fledgling democracy.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS: HALF THE BATTLE

¶19. In a country with only one elected female parliamentarian, women still face significant socioeconomic and political barriers. President Obama's emphasis on women's rights and girls' education ties into existing MEPI and Public Diplomacy grants to train women leaders on project management, journalism, and human rights, and to establish a women's "shadow parliament" to involve women leaders in the national political dialogue. MEPI has also funded training for women on information technology and IT entrepreneurship. USAID is currently supporting projects to increase women's participation within political parties and as candidates for elected office, and post has worked with NDI to launch a film promoting women's political participation. Post is currently working with religious leaders to educate the public about child marriage, discouraging the practice and emphasizing the importance of women's education in Islam in communities where child marriage is particularly prevalent.

CHALLENGES BEYOND YEMEN'S BORDERS

¶10. Educational initiatives, democratic development, and women's rights are important areas for US-Yemeni cooperation. However, according to many interlocutors, a "new beginning" in US-Yemeni relations will be signaled by movement on two issues: Palestine and Guantanamo. In discussions of the Cairo speech, most interlocutors focused on the perceived need for the US to work with Israel to ensure a just resolution of the Palestinian question. Likewise, the continuing detention of close to 100 Yemeni nationals in Guantanamo Bay draws regular condemnation from the Yemeni media and civil society organizations. Many interlocutors are expecting the repatriation of all of the Yemeni nationals in Guantanamo upon the closure of the facility. Thus the popular perception of US-Yemeni relations depends to a significant extent on issues that are beyond Yemen's borders and outside of post's control.

COMMENT

¶11. Yemen is currently facing unprecedented challenges on the economic, political, and security fronts, and many local and international observers are issuing pessimistic forecasts for the near future. However, there is still an opportunity to reverse troubling trend lines. A more robust engagement from the United States in the areas outlined above could pay significant dividends and help prevent the chorus of downbeat prognostications from becoming reality. END COMMENT.
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